

## The Snail

By **Steven DeLaney**

“The essence of monasticism as I see it is this doing something or living in a certain way for pure love of it and without further justification. And without necessarily pointing to any special practical result. Or to anything.”

Thomas Merton to Cid Corman [9/5/1966]

Those woods survived by mistake. A few acres of old growth in the Virginia Blue Ridge, missed by the maps of the loggers a hundred years ago. O happy fault, this razor thin glimpse of what was here before we were here.

You take road from Monterey, up the switchbacks to the peak. During the war, Stonewall’s men had shorn and plowed the top with earthworks and cannon. But no battle came. Men prepared to die on that hill, but that hill was spared.

Now the peak is an outdoor museum of war. So I stopped to look – and on the path around the hill I found an offshoot trail to this forgotten slope of ancient spruce, hickory, cedar, and oak.

You can tell an old forest by its fallen trees, huge trunks prone covered with white fans of mushroom, sinking into the ground. When they fall the vault of sky breaks open and sunlight spills to the forest floor like coins, a sudden wealth for a thousand tendrils reaching up. It will take a human lifetime to fill the gap.



**Steven DeLaney**

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**Steven DeLaney** was born in Montana, and grew up in Virginia. He studied history and theology, and lived for many years in Chicago, where he worked with youth who were incarcerated. He now lives in Williamsburg, VA, with his wife and two sons on a very small farm. He teaches at a Catholic high school, writes poetry and essays, and is finishing his first novel.

This loop trail was only a half-mile. A slip of water licked the path,  
 made the rocks wet. Just beyond the stream was a snail,  
 a thumb of mollusk seeping across the wet stones.  
 His, or her, antennae caressed the air as it glided.  
 They waved slowly, as if through a thickness. I stopped to look.

What was this snail doing? I mean, really . . .  
 What does it do? What does it do here? I mean, right here . . . in these woods.  
 I picked it up, and it shrank within its spiral shell.  
 How many snails are there here? One? A thousand?  
 I put the snail down. What do they do all day?

I might be the only person to see this snail. Ever.  
 And no one will ever see all those thousands of snails.  
 No one ever, ever, will see them. The woods could be teeming,  
 the woods are teeming with thousands upon thousands of snails.

I wanted to yell this, about the thousands of snails,  
 but I held it in, because the snails were silent about it,  
 and because their silence was beginning to find me.

How much is there that I will never know –  
 how much secret life?  
 And then this – the most freeing thought of all –  
*they don't need me*. They don't even know I am here.

All of these happy, hidden snails, playing in the leaf litter and dirt  
 on the floor of a forest centuries old, whom I will never know,  
 and they will never, never know me.

They just don't need me at all.